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Casey hopes to defend CIA on Capitol Hill

By Bill Gertz
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Ailing CIA Director William J. Casey hopes to return to Capitol Hill to defend himself and the agency against congressional criticism over the Iran arms affair, according to a CIA official.

At the White House, an official said yesterday that National Security Agency Director Lt. Gen. William Odom has emerged as a leading candidate to succeed Mr. Casey should he choose to resign. Other White House choices include former CIA Deputy Director Bobby R. Inman and Sen. Malcolm Wallop, Wyoming Republican.

Mr. Casey, 73, underwent brain surgery Dec. 18 at Georgetown University Hospital to remove a cancerous tumor. The surgery has left him with speech difficulties and weakness on the right side of his body, according to hospital doctors.

Intelligence sources said Mr. Casey recently had been treated for prostate cancer and that the White House had expected it might have to look for a successor even before last month's operation.

The CIA official, who declined to be named, said Mr. Casey wanted to recover sufficiently from the brain surgery to enable him to testify before the congressional select committees probing the administration's Iran arms dealings.

The official said Mr. Casey would like to present his side of the story about what both he and the agency knew of CIA involvement in a White House-run Iran covert operation and the alleged diversion of arms sales proceeds to the U.S.-backed Contra rebels in Nicaragua.

Before he was stricken by two seizures Dec. 15, Mr. Casey denied either he or the agency acted improperly or illegally in the Iran arms affair. He had been scheduled to testify before the Senate Intelligence Committee Dec. 16.

Senate Intelligence Committee Vice Chairman William Cohen, Maine Republican, said in a televison interview Sunday that former CIA Deputy Director John McMahon alerted the White House in the fall of 1985 that the CIA shipped weapons to Iran without written presidential authority.

The authority for the shipments was later contained in a Jan. 17, 1986, "finding" that was released by the White House last week.

According to an intelligence source, the CIA's inspector general completed a report two weeks ago on the agency's role in the arms deals. The report was submitted to Acting CIA Director Robert Gates, who has ordered a second study of the "mistakes made and lessons learned" from the affair, the source said.

The White House official, speaking on background, said Mr. Wallop, another leading choice to succeed Mr. Casey, told administration officials recently that he would accept the post only if President Reagan asked him to.

The official said Mr. Wallop informed the White House it would be politically unwise for Republicans to nominate him as CIA director because Wyoming's Democratic governor probably would appoint a Democrat to replace Mr. Wallop, thus further diminishing conservative influence in the Senate.

The White House official quoted Mr. Wallop, a Senate Intelligence Committee member for eight years, as saying that under the circumstances, he would favor Gen. Odom as a replacement for Mr. Casey.

Sources close to Mr. Wallop confirmed that the senator, while interested in the job, supports Gen. Odom for the job of CIA director.

The White House has said publicly that there is no search for a replacement.

Former CIA Deputy Director Inman is unlikely to accept the post because he recently took on a new job with a defense contractor specializing in electronics, the White House official said.

Mr. Inman, who is also a former NSA director, would like to become CIA director in a Democratic administration, a possibility that would diminish if he succeeded Mr. Casey and served out the remaining two years of the Reagan administration, the official said.

Mr. Gates' chances to become CIA director are expected to increase if the search for a Casey successor is prolonged, the official said.

White House staff involved in seeking a new CIA director are not expected to name a candidate who does not have professional intelligence experience, the official said.

Other candidates in that category who have been mentioned include former Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker, Tennessee Republican, Sen. Paul Laxalt, Nevada Republican, and former Sen. John Tower, Texas Republican.

Former United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick and current U.N. Ambassador Vernon Walters, a former CIA official, are also known to be candidates for the CIA director's post.

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